The Long and Winding Road

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The Long and Winding Road

by AtticusCrete

Summary

The first on the road for team Sassy Science, Will, Hannibal and Jack, everybody's favourite psycho-in-his-own-way takes-one-to-catch-one boss.

Or

Hannibal sleep talks and Will sleep walks, and there's a weird stag; that's clearly going to end well. Oh, And a boat. And a surprise.

Welcome to the Dr Plushy Pants AU where there is humour, tenderness, familiar faces, different deaths (squee), and some angst, corresponding fluff, slow burn, and divergences (Franklyn lives!). Watch for tags for each chapter/part. Canon adjacent. Maybe a second cousin twice removed - some events out of sequence.

And sorry about the titles, I'm rubbish at titles, and summaries, and notes, *shrugs* in my first four weeks of writing I clocked just under 100,000 words, what can I say? Feedback and friendliness gratefully received. I answer all comments, though it can take me a bit of time.

Sleep talking

'So, Hannibal, how much did you scheme just to get us here?' Will glances around the large and bland motel room. 'Bad weather, just two rooms left for four people and of course Jimmy and Brian shack up together, you're a bit obvious Dr'.

Hannibal looks down, momentarily abashed at his shameless manipulation of a situation he'd seen coming from at least two miles and one bad weather front away.

'It's particularly ridiculous when you didn't need to do any scheming at all'.

Hannibal gapes at Will '..what?'

'Sure, I've been looking for a moment to get you alone for weeks, I'm amazed you haven't noticed. Aren't you supposed to be good at observing? Well, observe this!'

Hannibal feels his knees almost give out under the sudden onslaught of a passionate embrace and invading kiss. 'Ohhh, Will.. I didn't know, ..how I've wanted to..' his words are eclipsed by the mouth claiming his and devouring his tongue. He fights for breath as Will dominates him in every way. He feels shaken to the core by the passion overwhelming his every sense, 'ohhhhh' he moans in ecstasy.

'Hannibal, Hannibal, wake up, wake up, it's just a bad dream are you ok? You're making a funny noise',

Hannibal blinks sharply. Will is leaning over him, shaking him by the shoulder. He realises he is sitting in the front of a rather grotty hire car which is drawn up outside the motel they'd all been staying in for the last few nights. Will is looking at him with concern.

'Are you alright, I know it's been a stressful few days. I know it's tough out in the field, gods I'm no poster child for FBI field work, are you ok?'

'Yes, Will, thank you. I am fine, merely resting'.

'Ok, if you're sure'.

The two men get out of the car and make their way into the motel and along the corridors that take them to their adjacent rooms. Will seems anxious to get into his room, and Hannibal wants to go over his dream and what he might have said, and to recall the memory of Will shaking him, laying his hands on him so intimately. Rousing him... oh yes, he'd have a little revisit of how that might have turned out right now...delicious.

Later that night both of them are lying in their over sized beds, both of them awake, Will staring at the ceiling in his room, Hannibal staring at the weird stain next to the light fitting in his, if he just turns his head it looks like the outline of Papua New Guinea.

Eventually Will gets up to make a drink, if he can't sleep he might as well do something, he fills the kettle in the tiny bathroom and sets it to boil. He's got some weird herbal thing from Hannibal which should help. Will sniffs it, it smells like pot pourri. What is his life even like if he is drinking room fragrance. He sighs and his cup clatters a little as he settles it with the tea bag in ready for the water.

Next door Hannibal hears the clatter of china. And he thinks he can just hear the sound of a kettle boiling. Will is awake too. Hannibal wonders if Will was beset by thoughts of him just as he is hounded out of sleep by thoughts of Will. He smells the faint tang of herbs. Oh. Will has brought the tea Hannibal has made for him. He finds himself feeling a hint of uncharacteristic sentimentality over the thought that he might be the source of comfort at, what is it, 3:15 in the morning. He swings his own legs over the side of his bed and makes use of the bathroom. As he washes his hands he wonders if he might have alerted Will to his wakeful state, the fan in the bathroom is rather noisy.

After another five minutes both men are straining to hear if there is any further sound coming from the other room. Hannibal devoutly wanting to assist Will in finding 'repose', Will thinking further about the things Hannibal had been muttering when he was asleep in the car.

Will had googled the different phrases as soon as he'd got into his room. He had recognised Hannibals words as Lithuanian, (yeah, he'd done his research), and now he knows what 'I love you', 'my precious mongoose' and 'little teacup' all sound like. And even though he knows it is a bad idea he texted Beverly to ask what she thought he should do. Stupid really, every suggestion included at least one thing that made Will's ears burn.

Eventually both of them fell asleep, thinking of the other, sleeping through until just before 8 when they are both woken by a call from Jack reminding them they aren't on holiday and there is a corpse waiting and could they please gets their arses in gear.

30 minutes later they are both locking their bedroom doors behind them. Hannibal glances at Will, he looks tired but alright (well, devastatingly beautiful in extremis really) and Will grinns/grimms back at Hannibal.

'Hey, I drank some of that tea in the night. Thanks for that. I think it helped. Was it a special blend, I mean, can I just buy it?'

'I made it for you, it's a bespoke combination, I don't mind making it if it's useful. I'm glad it helped'

'well, thanks for thinking of me'.

Hannibal sighs 'always dear Will, always' he turns and walks up the corridor ahead of Will.

Will looks after his what, friend? Doctor? Something else? Maybe? He grits his teeth. He is rubbish at this. He gets his phone out and texts Bev 'alright, this time I mean it. Help me. Please'.

In the breakfast bar Bev looks down at her phone, what she sees there makes her smile. Awww, her little precious needing her help now. With the DD (that's short for delectable

doctor btw). Cute. Bev texts Will back 'of course I'll help no problemo, I have at least three ideas ready to go right now..'

Will read his phone, he is struck by the sudden thought that this might go either really well or really whatever the total opposite of that is. Up to now he's resisted involving Beverly directly. Well, not beyond what she'd managed of her own volition. Still it couldn't be as bad as getting horny over his psychiatrist's sleep talking, or his own confused sleep walking, or a weird as fuck ravenstag dream stalking, or drinking sock drawer sachets in the dead of night.

Hannibal sighs, being a publicly professional person is so draining sometimes. This thing with Will is getting out of hand, at least in his own head and heart. What he'd give to simply take Will and crowd him up against a wall and explore him with all... no, no, no, mustn't think like that in public. He flushes and makes an effort to mentally compose himself. He had anticipated that this road trip with the FBI team might be a little strained.

He is enjoying the insider status and the opportunities it affords. But being this close to Will is turning out to be almost more temptation than he can resist. He pushes his way out into the street and heads for the diner they'd taken to frequenting each morning. As he walks along the road he idly takes his phone from his pocket, and an idea starts to form, he knows Beverly is already an ally. 'Ms Katz, I find myself in need of some wise words regarding our good friend Will, I wonder if you might be willing to assist?'

Bev is on her third doughnut, what? She was hungry alright? Sheesh, food police much? Her phone buzzes. She is expecting it to be her little pet Willigrams, they are going to have to come up with a good plan for that... her eyes widen in delight when she sees it is Dr Plushy Pants himself. 'Jimmy, Brian, put down those waffles, you need to come with me, I'm going to need your help with something..'

Tbc!

Sleep Walking

Chapter Summary

> Set around the lost boys case, where there's a whole FBI gang on the road. A long journey in an FBI SUV, plenty of contemplation and reflection. Life being lived between the exciting bits.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the back of the FBI SUV is the Sassy Science team with Will. Jack Crawford and Hannibal Lecter are in hire car following them. There's a little convoy of FBI related vehicles all heading towards a reasonably ok motel where they've been staying the last couple of days. They're getting closer to tracking the little ersatz family group in the 'Lost Boys' case. They've been in either SUVs or grotty cars or gritty motels for almost a week.

It's not been kind to them so far. Family shit always brings up family shit. Each of them have their own kin-based 'traumas', Beverly the oldest with a waster of a sister, Zeller in the middle with an over-achiever older brother and an over-achiever younger brother. In most families he'd be the over-achiever, but not his. Not his. Jimmy has a twin with whom he has a fraught relationship. Will, mostly tries not to talk about family. They all assume he's an only child, he hasn't said otherwise. His dad is still around but his mum is gone. No one has asked if she died or is otherwise departed.

When Will talked to Hannibal about the case they were both subdued. Will regretting what these boys were the architects of; the loss of their families to an overbearing woman's little dream, victims of Stockholm syndrome and capture bonding. It made his heart ache, even if he struggled with the concept of family it's more because of the expectations it fosters than the actual practice of family itself.

He feels like he has family - his dad, his dogs, his slowly expanding friendship circle, some of his colleagues are like the extended cousins you only ever meet at weddings and funerals but with whom you have just a few points of life in common so that you can share some time together. They count.

Will is an inclusive guy, it's just not that often that people want to be included. He's good at social miscues, he's good at being swamped and that can make him grumpy, he sometimes misreads social signals, and is either more or less disinhibited than a situation requires. It can be tiring, so sometimes he doesn't bother. It's why his circle expands slowly, usually.

Hannibal has his own reasons for finding family a challenging dynamic. Not because he hasn't experienced it but because he did for a time, in abundance. Those who say it is better to

have loved and lost than never to have loved at all don't (necessarily) know what they're talking about. His parents are both gone, he has an aunt and uncle living, and a sister. He tries not to think about it whenever he gets close to discussing family in the light of this case regardless of whether it is just he and Will or all of them together.

Even Jack, solid as a brick, sensitive as a brick, a takes-one-to-know-one psycho of a boss (all single minded unsentimental focus) is finding this case a challenge. He knows there's something up at home but he can't get a handle on it. It's difficult. He's never missed having kids but now he wonders whether that was a mistake that he and Bella made. He's been wondering lately if it's too late for lots of things.

He and Hannibal get on with each other well. They'd almost call each other friends. Almost. Will is regularly a point of contention between them. Hannibal knows that if Jack even suspected him of getting too close to Will he'd axe him from the team straight away.

Consequently he's working on an argument for when Jack does find out. Well. First of all there's got to be something for him to find out and that's not going well. He's asked for Beverly's help, identifying her as the keenest of allies but frankly at the moment they are all too overwhelmed with the case. Last night both he and Will were awake most of the night. For adjacent reasons in adjacent rooms.

Today Hannibal planned on travelling with Will but it became clear very quickly over breakfast that Jack was commandeering Hannibal's listening capacity for at least the first few hours of the day whilst he drove them across State lines for a few hundred miles. Will had smiled at Hannibal and agreed he was happy to go in the SUV. He could live with Bev's driving as long as Zeller and Jimmy didn't bitch slap each other.

Will is just so god damned tired. His head hurts almost continuously. He's been trying to work out how to move things on with the good doctor. So far, what, a handful of good conversations, some social time together, he's even stayed at the Dr's house. But he feels like he's stumbling over some of the cues.

Maybe it's just because he'd like it so much. Maybe it's because he feels like he's half in love without even the right signals. Hannibal is too damn good at being a blank slate. Sure he kissed him, and kind of asked for admittance into Will's little family. But. But. Will feels like he is slightly losing his grip.

'Will, babe, you're using up all the oxygen'

'What?' Will looks at Beverly, hand over his mouth in a huge yawn 'oh sorry. I didn't sleep too well last night'

'You're not alone!'

'No, I really was.'

'That's not what I meant' Bev smirks and it manages to coax a small smile out of Will. He looks at her. She's become a friend. He trusts her. God he tells her stuff he'd never normally say out loud. She's smart, Sassy, and fun. It means that he gets to be like that when he's

around her for a long time. For him it's a bit exhausting being her, but he suspects that's true the other way round too. If it worked like that. Which it doesn't. Still, she doesn't force it. They've done the whole sit round eat pizza and not say much.

He knows what siblings are like and this thing he has with Bev isn't that. Maybe it's because she's resolutely not interested in him romantically. They'd had a conversation about that where she'd said that what she liked with him was that they were close but without worrying about the so called 'benefits'. It means they've sometimes slept in the same bed if she crashes at his house, or once when the two of them were at some day event in New York which ended up being an overnight because of the weather. It means that he bounced her on his lap in the bar after they'd been to the Rocky Horror Show and thought nothing of it, knowing that she didn't either.

Occasionally he worries that Jimmy and Zeller might feel likes he's muscled in. But so far the only jealousy, which Brian owned up to, was to do with status in the group in Jack's eyes. He's been out with just the two of them and it's been ok. Not as snappy as when Bev is there. But nice. Calm and with some humour. Despite the horrors of the field he knows the team have made it easier for him. Which given that it's hell is really saying something.

Will isn't really sure that Jack knows what it's doing to him. He's in a state of almost constant fear. It's not always at the surface but when it is it's almost paralysing. He accounts for every moment of pleasure, or gladness, or peace, or joy and it's as though he has a ledger of credit against which runs the debit of the killers and the kills they have all been exposed to recently. He's already in overdraft and is fast approaching his credit limit. His bank manager is going to call him in soon.

He smiles at the thought, he'd tried it out on Hannibal as an extended metaphor but he suspects that Hannibal missed the first bit of what he'd said as he offered Will what ever loan he needed to get back into credit. Or maybe he didn't miss it? Maybe that meant something else. Will jolts as there is a bright shaft of light and pain in his head. He moans slightly.

In the backseat the sound wakes Jimmy from a slight doze brought on by the rhythm of the tires over the joins in the asphalt every twenty yards or so.

'You alright?'

'Really? I don't feel great. I've started to, and please don't laugh because I can barely cope with it, I think I'm having some kind of weird hallucination thing going on. You know I stayed with Dr Lecter, Hannibal after the thing with the cops? He had to bring me indoors at some ungodly hour because I was sleepwalking. He slept in a chair in the door of the room so I couldn't get out again.'

'Will, Hun, why didn't you say anything?' Jimmy, for all his sharp archness is, underneath his not very deep mantle of camp, a man of great tenderness and loyalty 'should you even be on the road? Shit, you were driving yesterday.'

'It's why Jack has the car today. I told him I didn't think I was safe to drive, he's not wild about it. It's why Hannibal is here, it's in case I fall flat on my face. It was a bit awkward' he laughs ruefully 'I wasn't going to say anything to Jack, because really we all know he doesn't

want to know and even if he did know he'd probably ignore it, but Hannibal assumed I'd have told Jack about the sleepwalking, and the stag. (What stag? Thinks Bev) Apparently they had one of those staring and saying as little as possible in an alpha kind of way conversations. Where the person who said the least won? You know?'

'Sure. Which one of them did win?'

'That's less clear, Hannibal is here, but Jack's commandeered him and is driving, so I dunno'

'Will, is there anything we can do to help?' Bev keeps her eye on the road but reaches out to vaguely pat her friend.

'I slept so badly last night that there's a good chance I'll have some kind of exhausted episode over the next couple of days. The terrible thing is I won't necessarily know that's something is either happening or has happened. I guess. I guess I'm asking for help' he goes quiet again 'sorry'

'Oh my god' grumbles Brian 'you actually think you need to apologise to us for being made to do something so bad for you you're seeing and hearing things without even knowing. Man, we've gotta boost your self esteem or something. Fuck Will, of course we'll help, even I'm not that big of a shit....ok, I am, but not over something like this. There are degrees of suffering, and fuckit I'm only on a three out of ten or something.'

Jimmy smiles 'hey can we make this a thing? Where at the start and finish of each day we say how far above or below the line we are? We can track how...' he trails off. 'What am I talking about? We'll all start below the line and finish somewhere off the chart most days.'

'Not the Rocky Horror day, except for the police thing, and then we had that great evening at Wolf Trap, that was what nearly 30 hours of good times. Yeah yeah, apart from the police thing, sorry Will' Zeller leans forward from the back seat to aim a light punch at Will's shoulder. He's surprised when Will sort of pats him as he does it. Brian too is getting used to the idea of having another friend.

He's not that big on friends, for a long while he thought that the job was basically his life. Now he's been looking at it differently. He's watched how it's grinding Will into the ground. Even though they all do what they can for each other he knows now - work won't love you back. It's making him think. He hopes he might get a chance to talk to Jack about some extra training or career development or something. Maybe.

He comes back to what Will was saying ' alright then so what can we Actually do that might help when it happens, because it sounds more like when than if?

'I think you're right. And I'm not honestly sure. Apparently speaking to me doesn't help, I'm just staring ahead so visual seems to be irrelevant. So ...' Will is all out of ideas though he notices the novelty of being asked is refreshing.

'How about we try smell and taste and touch?' Asks Jimmy

'Okay.....' Will says slowly, 'but no groping! This is not a licence to fondle me when I'm out of it. Nice try though.' He winks salaciously at Jimmy who sticks his tongue out in reply. 'Nice. Mature'

'I am the epitome of mature' says Jimmy, putting his nose in the air as if he is aggrieved rather than the one implying he might cop a feel.

'Ok, so we won't do that, but how about rubbing your hands, or your upper back, would that be ok?' (outside his clothes, stop it Jimmy) Jimmy pouts. They all smile. Jimmy pouts very well. 'How about taste and smell, have you tried that?'

'Ok, no I haven't, what do you have in mind?'

'Is there any smell that has nothing but good associations for you?'

'Actually yeah, coal tar soap. My grandmaw had it all the time. I went out with someone at college for ages before I realised that what I liked about him was that he smelled of coal tar soap! Actually he was ok so it's a good memory.'

'Ok, we can try that. We'll pick some up the next drugstore or supermarket we see. What about taste, can we feed you things?'

'Maybe just sweet coffee, or coke float. Either might do it. I don't actually know if I can drink, but we could try? Just knowing we've got some kind of plan even if it's a bit thin is really great. You're great. I don't think I say thank you enough.'

'I've got a question?'

'What Z?'

'How will we know if you've finished processing a scene? You sometimes look a bit out of it then'

'I reckon if I've gone over 40 minutes I'm already putting impossible stress on my system. So how about if that happens you pull me out anyway? Maybe we should ask Dr Lecter, he might have an opinion in all this. But honestly? I feel glad we're being proactive. It's even be nice to be able to have a normal conversation with Hannibal. I mostly talk to him when I'm half out of my brain. We managed normal for a whole day recently, it was amazing! Though I had sleep walked the night before. But I didn't know so I thought it was good!

'But it's a bit tricky, I don't really know if he's here as my doctor or not. If he is then he'll keep it quiet but that, well you all know...' his voice trails off. They do all know. Pretty much. 'If he's not my doc he can talk to Jack (not ideal, Jimmy murmurs) but, I don't know. It's all a bit. Vague. Complicated. Or is that just me? I can't tell? Maybe I'm just too tired to make sense. Can we swop seats at the next rest place?'

5 miles later Jack is surprised to see Bev indicate that they're pulling over. He pulls out his cell phone and puts it on speaker and calls Jimmy

'Why are you stopping, we've another hour at least?'

'Hi Jack, yes we're fine thanks, we all need a pee and we're swapping seats so Will can sleep in the back.'

'What's the matter with him?' Hannibal looks sharply at Jack, he's heard the irritation in Jacks tone, and is gearing up to intervene. Jack must know Will is in a bad way, but he'll keep quiet for now and see how it plays out.

'He just needs a proper bit of rest where he feels completely safe, and right now that's with us.'

The big SUV comes to a stop at the local version of a gas and gulp, the small convoy empties its passengers into the Tarmac and people go off in Search of rest rooms, the small snack shop, and the gas nozzles. As they draw back together Zeller and Bev are having a quiet conversation. When they see Jack, Brian approaches him,

'Hey can I swop out with the doctor. I'd quite like your advice on something, and this is a good way to get some time with you when it'd just be driving. In fact I'll even drive.. how about it. Dr.L do you mind swapping? Jack?'

'Sure Z if you'll drive. Yeah. Great. Get in, tell me about it?' Jack doesn't wait for Hannibal's acquiescence, and Zeller just gives the doctor a ghost of a wink.

Back at the evidence SUV Bev has manoeuvred Will into the back with a couple of pillows and blankets and has swapped Jimmy into the front. Will smiles weakly at Bev's blatant manipulation of the situation. But hey he's not making progress so if Bev or Jimmy have a plan, he'll take it. Even if the plan is simply sleep.

He smiles faintly at Hannibal as they both climb onto the long back seat. Will gives up one of his pillows and Hannibal removes his overcoat to double as a blanket. Will manages to semi curl up with his knees resting on the seat and the blanket pulled up to his shoulder. He is asleep even before they've pulled out of the parking lot.

Bev catches Hannibal's eye in the rear view mirror and smiles faintly. He smiles back 'well done Beverly.' She smiles more, now he's called her Beverly. Nice. She pulls out onto the road and Jimmy dozes off again in the front of the car.

30 minutes later the SUV is filled with the soft and deep breathing of three men at the end of their collective tethers. She glances back in the rear view, Hannibal is also asleep, leaning in the corner between the seat and the sliding door. Will has also migrated so that his pillow is firmly in the doctor's lap and his head is on it. It's given him just enough room to curl up properly. Hannibal's coat is over him as well as the blanket. If Bev sits up a little she can just see his face in the mirror. Hannibal's left hand is resting on the corner where Will's neck meets his shoulder, and his right is just beside Wills head, as though he stroked it before he too slept.

Her friends. Whom she loves. She thinks about the boys they're trying to find. When do lost boys stop being lost boys but become lost as men instead? She thinks of these three of her lost ones; Jimmy, drinking slightly too much, slightly bitter about his brother, slightly unhappy about the state of his love life, slightly tired of FBI work; Hannibal who carries the

cloak of some invisible horror that she doesn't yet know him well enough to ask about, but she knows it's there, she sees it round the edges of his expression and words; and Will, sweet, wonky, grumpy, lovely, scattered. Both destroyed by and destroying the good and the bad in his life. Finding it hard to discriminate between the two. Also lovelorn.

All three of her men here are lost from love. Or rather passion, great waves of intimacy, doesn't have to even be sexual especially, but meaningful. They share a certain kind of quiet love, one that is worthy of the name. But a delicate and brittle thing with only a small unsteady heart. She aches for them. How is it that she got her life together and her act together when these three have not? Chance she thinks, chance, biology, opportunity, roads taken or not taken either by her or others. There are times when she feels dragged down, but she's also blessed with the kind of outlook that observes when other say a glass is half full or half empty, she's already found the bottle and is guzzling direct.

They should have gone for a different motel. But instead everyone opted for a long drive at the beginning and end of the day. Pretending that they were settled because they had someone to lay their heads for more than one night and glad they didn't have to pack up in the morning.

She's more wired than tired. But she has a plan, it involves bed socks (can't sleep with cold feet it's an evolutionary impossibility) a warm lavender bath, or at the worst lavender sprayed all over her pillow, good ear plugs because damn those walls are thin, and a trashy novel to go to sleep to. She knows what works for her. So she'll go for it! It's part of the way she is not lost but found. She has found what works and does it.

Another forty minutes and she's reluctantly pulling into the motel car park. Tomorrow they'll be heading in a different direction. There's a bolo out on a car registration and there have been some unconfirmed sitings further south. But they get to 'sleep' tonight. Shit, what can they do about Will?

.....

They're eating together as a small group. They've chosen a small mom and pop place down the road from the motel that even Hannibal is willing to try. He blanched slightly at the paper wrapped flatware but has no complaints about the plain but well cooked food. It's not haute cuisine, but it's a style of down home food he can understand.

The others are stuffing their faces. Even Will is eating. He'll be fine if no one mentions it or looks at him funny, or if the wind blows or... it doesn't take much to put Will off the normal things of life when he's this far gone. When they've finished the mains Jimmy observes that there is pie. There follows a happy conversation about Pythagoras and other historic mathematicians, and eventually pie for everyone.

The woman serving them smiles as though they were the first to ever make a joke about it. She decides not to show them the menu with the sciencey names for all the desserts, like atomic bombe, and banana split atom, and apple piethagoras, and a Fruit Plato. If they come back again she'll get it out. It's like a reward for good customer behaviour, especially if they tip.

She looks at them and wonders why they're here. They're a funny mix. Five men and a woman. One African American gentleman who seems to be the boss, at least he keeps picking up the receipt she issues, one well dressed foreign man with lovely manners, a south East Asian lady who is as bright as button and as feisty as anything, a rather swell older guy in a nice pea jacket, another guy who is acerbic and smart, and a guy who is quieter and sweet as pi. She smiles to herself about her own joke. She knows they're staying at the motel, the grapevine is good enough for that. She'll have a nosey little phone call later.

The group decide to head back to the motel for coffee. It turns out Hannibal brought a French press and decent coffee with him. Everyone collects their mug or cup from their bedrooms and they all congregate back in his room. Will brings his chair from the room next door - he's just discovered the adjoining door unlocks with his key, well that's interesting. Maybe he can find out if Hannibal's key works too. It's one of those card things.

Bev brings her chair from just across the corridor, there's enough space for everyone to sit down, bed, desk chair, comfy chair. They sit around and talk, coffee gives way to whatever alcohol anyone brought Jimmy has gin and tonic, Bev has beer, Jack brought bourbon, Hannibal brought red wine and a decent corkscrew and a wine glass. Of course he did. (Actually he has another glass but let's keep that between ourselves for now). Zeller ran out of beer yesterday but he knows Bev won't be mean. Somewhere close to one a.m. they all wind the evening down. Bev hangs back to talk to Will and pulls him into her room. Hannibal observes them go. He tries his own key in the door that joins his and Will's room. There's a green light. It does work.

In Beverly's room there's a conversation going on about whether Will is sleeping alone tonight or whether Bev will stay with him. Because of the sleepwalking. In the end they opt for not. If Jack found out he'd blow his top. And Will isn't sure what Hannibal will make of it, and he doesn't want to complicate that whole relationship even more.

Bev thinks about insisting but then realises she is stressing Will further and backs right off. Rubs his head and pushes him into his own room, with a 'night night idiot' that is loud enough for anyone listening in to check on bed time arrangements to hear followed by two doors closing on opposite sides of the corridor.

Consequently at 4 in the morning there is nobody to observe Will walk out of his bedroom and down the corridor to the motel's front door. There are no dogs to bark at his departure. No one asleep in a chair or bed to notice his going. And because they had all drunk well and slept badly, (or they are as good at sleeping as Bev is) everyone else sleeps tonight. Will sleeps too but he's also walking.

Chapter End Notes

For those of a nervous disposition, Will will be fine.

Sleep Stalking Part 1

Chapter Summary

> Will has been the opposite of kidnapped. It's not what you might imagine. Still set around the lost boys case. With more lost/found tropes. And Thanksgiving. And good pie. And magic.

Bev yawns her way into the diner. She can see that Jimmy is already there. So is Dr. Lecter. They both look groomed in a valiant tilt at a dear-god-it's-way-too-early kind of way. As she is sitting down Zeller joins them . He looks impossibly awake. Apparently he's already been out for a run this morning. They all hate him.

After they've ordered from the same woman who served them last night they settle into that kind of early stupor that washes over those destined to spend yet another day in each other's company, still the same people all swimming in the same deep pond of stress. Jack avoids breakfast. He usually appears about ten minutes to go with plans, directions, and strategy. He usually barks. Sometimes if he's desperate he'll get a flask of coffee, hoping for something that didn't start life this morning as granules.

When he appears they know it's time to go. He's just had a call saying they've been too slow. There's another scene, about an hour away. He's arranged for them all to stay on at the motel another night, it means that Bev and Jimmy go back to the motel car park for the SUV and Zeller, Jack and Hannibal get in the car at the diner. The other two cars of agents and techs. have already left from the motel.

Somehow, in the midst of departures and mornings and fantastically bad communication Bev thinks Will is with Jack, and Jack thinks Will is with either Bev or the other agents. When they arrive at the other scene Jack asks Jimmy where the hell Will is. And that's when it all spirals. It takes them thirty minutes to establish he wasn't in any of the cars. They all stand for a moment just looking at each other. Jimmy phones the motel and the receptionist/cleaner/manager goes to knock on his door. There's no one in so she relays this to Jimmy.

He's resolutely not there. He's also not answering his phone. Jimmy can hear it ringing inside the room through his own phone when the manager holds her's up to the door. She goes in to the room to check, sure enough there's Wills phone, beside the bed. But no Will and no sign of a struggle.

At that moment they realise the enormity of what's happened. Some time between 1 and maybe six when the reception opened up, Will has gone. They think back to the conversations yesterday. Bev is already kicking herself. Hard. But so is everyone. It's a shared moment of sheer concern.

But it's the FBI, and they are nothing if not relentless. Jack gets things moving and gets some of the b team of techs into the scene. They won't wait for Will. Where ever he is, they'll just get on and process the scene, see if there's anything obvious.

Jimmy gets the manager on to cctv - only a shot of Will leaving at just after 4am. He's wearing just shorts and a tee shirt. Wherever he is he could be cold and foot sore. The manager also scares up her husband who doubles as the night watch at the local gas station. He saw someone walk past a little after 4:15. So now they know what direction. Jack gets on to the local sheriff's department and they soon have personnel scouting along the route they think Will must have taken.

It's now nearly 10. Wherever Will is he's been gone for six hours. None of them are visibly panicking but there is a real thread of anxiety connecting them. Probably only a shout away from blaming each other, as well as themselves.

The sheriffs department spend the next few hours scouring along the road in both directions from the motel. It's a mixture of thin woodlands, scrub and arable farming, so at least they don't think Will can have gone off into deep forest.

They've got volunteers checking outhouses and barns and the spread out population of farmhouses and small dwellings. Come 4pm they've covered an impressive spread of area. The team is thorough, they had a pair of kids go missing the previous summer so there is both a list and a group of people who more or less know what they're doing. No one likes that it's the Feds. And especially no one likes the idea of a dead fed. No one is saying that though.

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When Will wakes up his first few thoughts run something like this: "wow, I must have missed my alarm call, I wonder if Hannibal's awake yet? I shouldn't have had that second beer, where are my glasses? I'm hungry". Then there's a brief period of static as he takes in his surroundings, and then "where the fuck, oh shit, SHIT. No one has this many tools with sharp metal edges for good reasons."

As he looks around (no glasses, bugger) he realises that as well as the bed he's lying on there's a table and couple of chairs and what looks like a line of kitchen cabinets against a far wall. It's not a big building, somewhere between a cabin and a barn, but a small barn not one of those huge things you could hold a politician's rally in. There are windows and they're of a decent size, but they're also barred. Not in a *hysterical giggle* I keep prisoners in here way, more in a, these are valuable tools, valuable sharp tools and we don't want no kids getting in to thieve them or hurt themselves kind of fashion.

He looks around some more. There's a pair of pants and a shirt and sweater on a chair with socks and wooden slat shoes. He dresses. Instantly feeling better and less vulnerable. There's a small marble based cold shelf. There's milk in a terracotta cooler, and some cheese and butter. And it might be ham. There's a small gas ring attached to a portable tank. In a tin he finds some tea and in another some sugar. He looks around for water, over in a far corner is a tap and sink. There's no toilet so maybe there's an adjoining out house or something.

At the moment he's hungry and thirsty so, well, he'll have tea and scout around for something like bread. He doesn't find bread but he finds a tin of crackers and some tins of soup in an apple crate, 6 of which have been turned on their side to act as a set of shelves. In a New York boutique it would be artsy, here's it's just meeting a need.

He doesn't have a watch or his phone so he can't tell what time it is but it feels like late morning given how hungry he is. He assumes that his friends and colleagues have missed him by now. How the fuck did he end up here. He thinks hard. It's a blank. Then he remembers the stag. It was in his room and wanted him to follow. He didn't question that it could walk through walls, he just went after it, finding doors in the right place to track it closely.

He's never been afraid of the stag, even though it's feathered, it's a bit like how he imagines a more solid patronus or daemon would be. (Hey he reads, he's not an oaf you know) he doesn't thinks it wants to hurt him, more that it has its own agenda which he doesn't always understand. Given that he's pretty sure it's a manifestation of his subconscious he's rather intrigued. At the same time he also tells his brain that it'd be more useful if it came up with a slightly less complex metaphor for whatever it is he's trying to let himself know.

He's used to the stag now, and frankly he likes this visual hallucination if that's what it is, way more than Garrett Jacob Hobbs who is frankly a monosyllabic bore. He only sees Hobbs when he's very stressed. It's kind of a benchmark now. On a scale of one to Hobbs how bad am I today? Ah, that bad. He thinks Jimmy might be entertained by this, actually they all would be. He feels a bit sad.

He's just realised he hasn't actually tried the door. He actually appreciated the lie in! And hasn't even looked at it. How bad is his life that he doesn't care enough to find out, that being left in a barn with food and warmth - shit he'll take it! He momentarily wonders, is this just a very vivid hallucination? If it is, well, still it's better than Hobbs isn't it?

He finishes up his cup of tea, good, strong in a nice China mug. And he eats a couple more crackers with cheese. He dusts himself off and then heads towards the door. At first he thinks it's barred or locked or something, but then he realises he's pushing it the wrong way. He laughs at himself for that. Like a bad horror movie when the hero can't get out of a room because a. the gang split up (never split the group, just sayin') and b. they keep pushing the door even though there's a sign that says 'pull'.

Outside, the small barn is near another building, maybe a small log cabin, or another barn. Hard to tell. He walks round it and is astonished that at the front he finds two men sitting in chairs. One smoking and the other whittling. The older of the two men is probably in his eighties, the younger maybe in his forties. They don't look surprised to see Will. He guesses this is their place and will know how come he's there. Maybe brought him here. Or something.

'Pull up a log, boy, don't be standing when you could be sitting' the old man gestures at a log which Will moves slightly closer.

'You the Fed?'

'I guess that's so. I'm a teacher at the FBI college, but they bring me out sometimes'

'you ok?'

'Stress, nightmares, sleepwalking? So not really ok, no. Thanks for asking'

'Ain't no problem to me to ask. People don't ask, just make assumptions' the old man glances at the younger. 'This is my boy. You met his sister last night at the diner'

Will smiles 'the excellent pie', the old man nods happily

'Well surely. My boy found you this morning. He likes to be up and out, you was out early too. What's going on with you?'

'I guess I was sleepwalking. I had this odd hallucination of a stag and it seems to matter that I followed'

The younger man snorts at this and Will looks at him enquiringly 'what is it?' He asks carefully.

'He won't say, but don't you worry about that none. You an animal person then?'

'Dogs mainly, but yes. Animals, birds, fixing them, collecting them, and hallucinating them too it seems.'

The younger man looks very happy at this, he nudges the old man who grins at him, they get up and turn to Will. 'Come and see then'

Will can't sense anything especially crazily off, (apart from the tools in the barn, and hey, no banjos) but then he sees phantom deer regularly so who is he to say what counts as crazy. He's only one kind of crazy. So he follows. They go back round the house, past his barn (yeah it's his barn in his head) and along a track, at the end of the track there's a big corral, and another building. The three of them go inside. Indoors it's a big, well, animal hospital, a herbalists and apothecary, and maybe there's a still or two as well. He doesn't look too close. He's a Fed. He gets their caution. Amazed they trust him thus far.

The younger man shows him various animals being treated, he doesn't speak at all but kind of snuffles. The old man explains who is in and being treated for what. It makes Will think of some kind of characters from Tolkien. Away in small woods, keeping to themselves. But kind. Hopefully. A last homely house.

After introductions all round Will thinks to ask why they brought him here and not back to the diner or motel.

'When the boy found you, you was going up hill. At first he just followed you. But then he got worried and guided you down ways. He brought you in, well, we do a lot of healing for folk around here, so he was maybe hoping we'd make you better. For a bit at least. He thought you needed sleep, so we put you in the barn. When people bring their sick or their animals they sometimes stay in there, waiting on a cure.

Will looks at the younger man, probably a bit older than him, but not much. He looks soft at the edges, and maybe as though someone pressed down on his face just spreading it out somehow, like a giant with play-do. 'Thank you. I'm grateful. I'm not quite sure this isn't a dream. If it is it's one of the better ones.' The younger man smiles and ducks his head, shy.

'You probably guessed, but my boy came back from the fighting with a thing. We can't quite shake it, but he's doing good right now.'

Will looks at the man, feeling only compassion. He knows he's one step away from the place this man occupies. Just one step. He looks at the older man. 'You're father and son then? And your daughter is here too?'

'Sure, and her husband. And there's cousins and others. You know how that works, or are you city?'

'No, no. I'm from down aways, I've got so much family, my family have got family!'

Both the men laugh at this. 'We reckon we should let you stay just till tomorrow, there's things we can show you, tell you. That'll help with it all'

Will is about to object, he knows his friends will be looking for him. But he's also aware of how closely the two men are watching. He has no idea if this could turn bad or not. He doesn't want to find out. And so far it's been benevolent. He smiles and asks

'Will that be ok to stay, just until tomorrow, I don't want to be a burden, or bring any trouble to you. I'd hate for that.'

The old man nods. Will seems to have passed some kind of test. They go back to the porch and the younger man brings a table from indoors and sets it up outside. He brings out flatware and plates and bread and then the kinds of things Will thinks of as his dad's sort of food, soup, crackers, pickles, slaw, cold meat. The two men pull up their chairs and then Will rolls his log over. The old man says grace. Just short and thankful. And they eat. Will increasingly feels it's a bit like an extended dream. If it is, it's a really good one.

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Everyone but Jack is back at the motel. Once again they're in Hannibal's room drinking coffee. It's dusk outside and they're going back to the diner to eat soon. They've come up against something of a road block. None of the local volunteers found anything. The local sheriff's department has put in an order for a sniffer dog but they won't arrive until tomorrow. They're stuck. Twiddling their thumbs. None of them saying that if Will is out overnight it's bad, very bad.

Jack phoned from the scene and confirmed it's the same group, but there's nothing new really. He tries not to be furious on the phone that Will is still lost. As though it's solely his fault. Hannibal has to bite his tongue so hard it bleeds in order not to lose his temper. Beverly is nervously hovering as though she could break apart and shatter.

There's nowhere to put their stress, so they take it with them, indigestion waiting to happen, to the diner. The woman smiles in greeting. Her husband is in tonight doing the dishes and looking after the grill. They order and the food is as good as ever. But they can barely notice. She takes pity on them a bit

'don't you be worrying now. We had two kids get lost last year, found them after a day or two, brought them back safely. I know you miss your boy. But we'll get him back. You'll see.'

They'd love to be comforted by the platitudes. But they see too much of the other darkling sides of life. But they try and be kind to the civilian. Her husband is whistling. Not unkindly, just a little soft tune. It's putting Hannibal on edge. He's angry. In part with himself for allowing Will to get to this point. In part because he did nothing. In part because, and here he has to be ruthless with himself, if something has happened to Will, he fears blood might be spilt. And he very much needs not to lose control around this group of people.

The man stops whistling and comes out to collect up plates from the mains.

'I guess you'll all be stayin for Thanksgiving tomorrow? We'd be glad to have you here. Lots of people come by, people who haven't got folks around here, or are aways, or lonesome. It'll be a good way to find out if anyone from further off has heard tell. Say you will and we'll make more pie'

Jimmy looks at the man, and shakes his hand. 'I think that's a fine offer, and we thank you. Obviously we hope our friend has turned up by then. But we'd be glad to stay. I hope we won't be too somber an addition'

'Oh everyone's got sorrows, and family can do that to you. But we like to say you can choose to be the sort of family you are, and we live to it here' he smiles and takes the plates away.

'I had completely lost track. I'm going to have to phone my mom. She's not going to be happy.' Bev takes out her cell and walks outside. They can see her breath vaporising in the cool evening air. She waves her hands around a bit, but clearly gets some point across as she's laughing by the end.

The group have dessert. Grief can make you hungry or sick to your stomach. They want pie. The woman brings out the special menu. And it does make them smile. They tip well that evening. Grateful in a myriad of ways. Hannibal is still so angry and is surprised when the woman stops him with a hand on his arm as he is leaving, she waits until Zeller and Jimmy have gone through the door and it's closed behind them. He can see the three science team members looking back through the big glass window that fronts the diner, waiting for him.

'I know you're mad. At yourself mainly, not because he's gone, thought that too of course. But because you haven't told him. And you're worried you won't get to. Be kinder to yourself. I know that doesn't come easy. And you probably think I'm rude to be speaking to you like this. I probably am rude. But I'm honest. And I think today you need truth. I ask myself a lot is it true, is it necessary, is it kind? So I'm telling you this. So that you will be too, true, necessary, kind, when the time comes.'

'What if that time has already passed?' Hannibal can't look at her.

'It's not as late as you think. You'll see'

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In the late evening, the younger man lights a Coleman lamp and gives it to Will to take out to the barn. He shows him how to turn it lower or higher, and where the door to the outhouse is. There's a small stove and some kindling, but the man shrugs as if to say he might not need it because it's maybe not so cold.

They've spent the afternoon either with the animals, or whittling, and Will has made some ties, the old man is a keen fly fisherman, another point of connection between them. If it wasn't for the concern in the back of his mind about his friends this would be the best kind of holiday away from hell.

He wonders how they're taking it. He knows he couldn't just up and go back, he has no idea where he is or how to get to even the nearest road. He's stuck, but he's not an entirely reluctant captive. Ahh capture bonding. He's not immune to it. Knows he's already adapted so that they like him more. Want to keep him with them for the night and next day. He's tried to care. But apart from his friends he can't bring himself to care for himself. There are worse places to be.

Supper is simple but the old man reminds him that tomorrow is Thanksgiving. And didn't that just pass him by. Will finds out that everyone from round about that doesn't have someone all come together at the diner to share the meal. They'll be going too. Apparently the supper will mark the end of his mini break. He'll be going back to the Feds at the end. He wonders at the part of him that kind of wishes he wasn't going to.

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That night Hannibal drinks the remainder of the wine, the reminder of the wine, he'd hoped to drink it with Will, and is then angry with himself. Again. He's beginning to bore himself with his mild histrionics. He feels like he wants to break something, badly. Something he values, so that it's a kind of sacrifice for what he really cares about. He looks at his ties, his pocket squares. Nothing adequate for the sympathetic magic of the kind he's reckoning on.

He opens his wallet. In a small glassine envelope he has some strands of wheat blond hair. He takes them out. They're tied in a small green ribbon. It's not all he has of his sister. And maybe it won't be enough to bring Will back safe. But if there is such an answering cry in the universe he'll offer this up. If the teacup... He glances at the ceiling, to check on the fire alarm. He has no wish to set off the sprinklers with the small and probably futile gesture he is going to make. He undoes the ribbon and pushes it back into the envelope. And then burns the hair. Wishing. Hoping. If he believed in anything more than the last echoes of ancient gods this is who he would be praying to.

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Beverly wants to cry. But she is forcing herself to sleep. Tricking herself with the her usual rituals and rhythms, to wear herself out. Hoping. She asked her mother to light incense tomorrow at the family shrine.

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Zeller and Jimmy are lying quietly together in the same room. This is new for them. They know everyone thinks of them as some old married couple. But they've not done this before. But somehow, the urgency. The possibility that it might be too late coming up fast and slapping them both round the face. They hardly had to even say anything. It just seemed inevitable.

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In the log cabin the younger man is laughing in his dreams, carrying his new friend on the back of a giant elk.

The old man, he doesn't sleep much so he sits up and watches the door of the barn, just to be sure.

In the barn Will sleeps. And sleeps. And sleeps. His dreams aren't haunting or hunting. The goddess of the night embraces him.

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Sleep Stalking part 2

At some early hour Will is woken not by a bad dream, or by drowning in his own sweat, or by the feeling of gravel under his feet, but by birdsong. He opens his eyes, the barn is still shadowed but the light is like swimming underwater. Clean and somehow green. He feels refreshed. He shuffles his way to the gas burner and shakes the kettle to see if there is any water left. He sets it to boil.

In short order he is drinking tea. He eats some crackers again. The crunch reminding him this is not a dream. He takes his tea to the door of the barn. It's crisper today somehow. Not cold, but the promise of cold and dark, a time to be secret and still. When all that is good retreats underground to sustain itself for when the sun returns.

Thanksgiving. He knows the difficult politics of the day. The history. Thankstaking, after all. And how it has been taken over by consumption and greed rather than quiet gladness and need.

He offers the dregs of his tea to a vine winding itself over the barn. Finds his slat shoes and sets off towards the corral. Once in sight he is greeted by something magical. The two men are there feeding a stag and his doe by hand. Will stills, just to watch.

The younger man beckons lightly to Will with just a twitch of his fingers, eyes not leaving the deer who regards him with a levelled kind of madness. Who could stand with humans if they were not mad. Humans are not soft or kind or any sweet thing. But fire and pain and death wrung out for pleasure and gluttony.

Will almost slides across the grass. The stag leans his head towards Will, offering. Will holds his breath and gently strokes its nose. The deer snorts and they both jump a little. But no one is so frightened that they leave. In a long slide of time Will pets the stag, the two other men stroking the doe.

Will knows he has tears gathering at the corners of his eyes. He thinks if they fall they might become pearls in the grass. To be carried away at night. Strung into the stars. Will wonders if today he is actually hallucinating. Something in the tea? If he is, he doesn't care.

To be sure drug induced madness doesn't have to be painful, but he's not sure he has grace enough to conjure up this sweet surrender to solace.

In the woods there is something like a crack of wood, and the sound of ravens calling to each other. There is a ripple of noise, like the ripples on a pond disturbed. The deer turn and walk back across the clearing, past the building and corral. They don't look back.

Wordlessly the three men walk back to the house. The old man makes coffee and then cuts a pie into six pieces giving each of them one on mismatched plates. They bow their heads to offer a silent grace. At the end each man reaches out and squeezes the hand of the one beside them. They eat, quiet. Still.

Will sighs and let's the tears sitting in his eyes slip away. The younger man holds out a handkerchief. A child's. Will wipes his eyes and the man gestures for him to keep the small square of printed cloth. He smooths it out on his lap, it's a picture of two deer. Not the cartoon of Disney but real enough.

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In the diner Bev is sitting with Hannibal. She has clearly cried but is endeavouring to be brave. Hannibal briefly squeezes her shoulder as he sits down opposite her. He too looks wrung out. There is no sign of Jimmy or Brian. Not yet.

'If Will has found somewhere to stay warm he will be alright. He will find somewhere and he will come back.' Hannibal wishes his voice sounded a bit stronger. He has to believe this. Must. He is glad to be with Beverly. They are both a kind of optimist.

Hannibal knows the worst happens, sometimes, after all, he happens, but he believes that the best can too. His version of what is the best often differs from others. And so he calls the glass half full, or the cellar, or the vineyard. He thinks too that his life has been half full. It is only because of Will that he now thinks it might, in fact, be half empty.

The server brings them coffee and pie, and toast and whatever it is they can think of for comfort. She is quieter with them today. A kind of tenderness. She rests her spare hand on each of their shoulders when she pours them coffee.

She doesn't say anything to Hannibal about what she'd said the night before. She can see in his outline that he has made some kind of bargain with himself. She hopes it's enough, for him, for the curly haired man.

Her father told her they'd spent the day quietly, that the man is kind, true, all compassion and feeling, but with some edges of science abutting all his love. Tempering it. Her father says her brother is happy too, that's it's been good for him to have this different company. He'd like to keep his new friend but understands he has to go back. Or his other friends will come looking for him.

Still, a time of gifts is better than no time. They gave the boys back last year. Just a day and night of playing, talking, the children feeling like real children, games, forts, dirt, play. Not the junior versions of adult pastimes.

She knows the feebies wouldn't understand, so she doesn't tell. No one local tells. They all know. And sometimes for the chance of healing you have to give a little to get even something. This is the offering they make.

Jimmy and Brian arrive and slide in beside Hannibal and Beverly.

'Do we have anything that looks like a plan?'

'The sheriff is coming by at 10, the dogs arrived this morning and they've been out for a few hours. We can see what he or the handlers have to say.'

'Anything else, has Jack called?'

'He texted. They think there's a confirmed siting. We might be this close to getting them'

'Am I allowed to not care very much? Is that wrong of me?'

'We all care, all the time, but let's face it there are always degrees of caring aren't there? This is Will. He's our friend. We love him.'

They are silent again. It lasts.

'How do people deal with something like this? What do they do? How can they? It's only been a day and I feel like I could just, I don't know, utterly fall apart. What about if we don't find him. What about if he doesn't come back?'

Beverly starts to cry again. This hurts. And for the first time they are encountering from the inside what it means for the families and the friends of the people with whom they have to deal. Because they are only in those people's lives because something very bad has happened to someone they know. Very bad.

The husband of the diner owner is back. He comes over and asks how they are doing, if they have an idea of their plan for the day. He nods and listens. And offers them something to do.

'Please, we have about twenty - thirty people coming tonight, we need pie - pumpkin, apple, pieplant, we need potatoes, we need parsnips, we need carrots, we need squash, we got chicken and turkey, and sausage. We need help. We could call it an exchange. And if there is something you need to go off and do you could go do it, but if you're waiting, why, let's wait together.'

The despondent group nods. There is rhythm in kitchen work. A composition of noise and scent and taste. It's something they can all do.

When the sheriff comes by he lets them know they've tried two quadrants and they're going to cover the other two this afternoon. Some of the guys will stay tonight and carry on tomorrow if there is need. He doesn't say he knows it will be fine. Doesn't say they'll find Will for sure. Every time he thinks to say it. But he worries that one year he'll say it, and it won't be true. So he holds back.

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Late in the afternoon Will has been making a spoon. Whittling. He whittled as a kid. Had a nice knife and a one for taking out the bowl. He likes the feel of this one. It's a bit of wood from a walnut tree. It lost a branch in a big storm last year and the men have been saving it for making good things.

Will faintly has the idea that he's making it for Hannibal though how he's going to explain this last day is something he's not sure about. Maybe make it one long dream sequence. It still has that quality. Like there is a dome covering them. His head hurts a bit. The old man has been watching him, so he's been trying not to flinch.

'Is it the girlie?' Asks the old man, gesturing at the spoon.

Will smiles. He has no idea really how this man might feel about Will's quiet obsession with his doctor, his male doctor. 'Did you see the group then?'

'No, but my girl told me. Nice people she said. Bit all over the place. Not enough peace between them even for one person. Some feelings in there. Hurt and pain, and anger. Violence too maybe. You all see too much?'

'Too much pain? For sure? And the rest. We're good with each other, to each other, mostly, because we see too much of the other. Of course we get it wrong and we fuck up and hurt each other too. But.' Will isn't sure how to explain.

'It's where the heart is.'

'Yeah. It is. The older European guy. With the suits and overcoat?'

The old man nods 'he's for you?'

Will smiles tightly 'I really hope so'

'He know?'

'I think so. I'm not very good at telling people. I'm not great as a ..'

'Sure you are. You're fine. And you've got a way about you. It's not what people tend to praise no more, but it's good.' This is the first time the younger man has spoken.

Both Will and his father look at him in surprise.

'There's only need for me to say, if no one else is thinking on it' he goes back to his quiet.

'Well damn me' says his father 'guess I should let the words and thought go some more' he smiles at his son. A big smile full of love and affection and things there are no need for words to describe.
'I'll get some sandpaper, you'll want to make that smooth' he gestures at the spoon. Will is grateful. For so much.

'What shall I say later. When I'm back? What do you want me to say?'

'Oh, you were lost and found yourself and maybe followed the light home?'

'As simple as that?'

'Surely'

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In the early evening, there's a large gathering at the diner. All the tables are set, there's a lot of pot holders down to act as mats, there are piles of china. Although the locals know who the

FBI group are now, and why they are still here, they aren't treated too delicately. The locals are friendly, friendlier than maybe the group were expecting.

Maybe the federal law is danced with lightly here. But the team are all Science and not so much police. Maybe they've offered Will as this year's lamb. For some reason then people are kind and laugh and include them.

There are all the usual aspects of thanksgiving, with some local traditions thrown in. A game something like pass the parcel but with wishes and dares. A complicated story that everyone joins in which tells the story of the first people's and nations from this area.

It's a child's story, so there are lines to repeat and actions and somehow they are lulled into a reminder that we are all one. In time and in the vast expanse of peoples across that time.

Some time towards the end of the pie and dessert, each person has to stand and say something they are glad to leave behind from the last year, and something they hope for in the one that is coming. Everyone listens. It's surprisingly humbling and moving. And honest.

When it gets to Jimmy he takes a deep breath and stands 'I'm leaving behind my dependence on the green bottle (he gets some nods and smiles of understanding), and I'm hoping to learn how to love wisely',

the lady from he motel stands 'I'm leaving behind doing everything at the job! (She earns lots of laughs), and I'm getting new help, and admitting I can't do it all (she gets applause for that).

Bev stands 'I'm leaving behind anger at my sister, and I'm going to tell her that I hope we can be good to each other this year'. (Again with the nods, ahh blood kin. The subtle pain of a paper-cut)

This carries on round to Zeller 'I'm trying to leave behind envy and the shit it makes of me.' He gulps and shakes his head 'and I'm hoping to be friends with people I usually push away'. His voice is tight as he finishes.

Hannibal feels the weight of what he wants to say lodged in his throat. He thinks back to what the woman said the night before "is it true, is it necessary, is it kind" good words to live by. He's not sure he can. He knows in part that it's the pull of the moment, as well as his own tendency towards the grand gesture that makes him want to make some great declaration.

Instead right at this moment all he can manage is 'I leave behind my fear. And I hope for love' he sits, there are some smiles, he reckons rightly that his whole persona had hinted he might wax eloquent. But sometimes simple is enough. Often. One of the group applauds lightly and there is a smattering. Sometimes the small gesture is grand in its scope.

It's like a spell has been cast. The meal becomes all clearing up together and singing and laughing and drinking coffee or ginger beer or tea. Mountain tea, not that there thing from outside. If someone mentioned incantations, or special dispensations, or the ritual of shared communion. No one would be surprised.

'I liked what you said' Hannibal feels a hand on his waist, and he turns straight to look at Will who has a tea towel in hand and some cutlery. Clearly halfway through his task. That Hannibal doesn't drop the charger he is holding is testimony to his years of self discipline, and restraint. 'I made you something. I'll give it to you later'

'Will?' It's barely a whisper.

Then there's a shriek from Beverly 'WILL!!!! OH MY GODS' the whole room laughs at this. Will is enveloped in a Bev shaped hug followed by Jimmy and Brian. They are all crying now.

Will looks at Hannibal steadily, still submerged by a nearly hysterical Bev. Neither of them say anything more. For now. Gradually everyone returns to the task at hand. Eventually all is tidied up and all that's left of the people are the woman and her husband, of the older man and his son there is no sign.

The sheriff's deputy is still there, she's some kind of cousin. Or has married in. She shakes Will's hand. He smiles at her. He gets the feel for the current that eddies and swirls here. There's something old and primal around about, he can feel it. He's had a brush with it, just a tippitt.

By some agreement the five of them all walk back together. Heading for coffee again in Hannibal's room. He's trying not to covet Will's time. He just wants to hold him close and not let him go. Feels it desperately.

Hannibal brings up the rear of the group as they walk along the tarmac. Bev has both her arms round Will as though she better not let go either. Jimmy has his hand crooked in Zeller's elbow. Some new understanding forged between them.

In Hannibal's room Zeller and Jimmy both have comfy chairs, Bev is hovering between sitting in the third and sitting next to Will on the bed. Hannibal is waiting for her to decide as he makes everyone something to drink.

She's finding it hard to settle. Torn between wanting to hug Will and sit where she can see him. It's as though she is embodying all the fears and tears from all of them over the last 36 hours. Eventually she sits on the bed. Hannibal settles. With his eyes on Will. They're all waiting.

'I'm glad to be back. And it was very strange. I'm not sure I even know where I was. With some people. And some animals. There was a stag.'

He stops. He knows he sounds as crazy as he sometimes feels. He looks down at his hands, he's holding the handkerchief with the deer printed on it. He sees Hannibal look at it. 'I don't think I imagined the deer, not this time. But I did drink some mountain tea.' He smiles at the memory. 'I don't think I have any good answers.'

'Thank you for looking for me. Thank you for, waiting. I'm not sure I can fill in all the blanks' he smiles sweetly at them, 'are you all ok?'

'I think we are all much improved for seeing you.' Hannibal is to the point, but it's almost as though everyone can hear all the words crowding up behind these waiting to fall out of his mouth if he ever opens it again.

Jimmy pulls Zeller to his feet and hugs Will. 'Time to go. Try not to get stag-napped' he winks. Zeller punches Will lightly on the shoulder 'you fucking scared us, don't do it again' he mutters.

Bev looks between Hannibal and Will and relinquishes her claim to Will. She doesn't say anything just rests her head against his collar bone for a moment and then scoots off the bed and over the corridor to her own room.

Will stands up from the bed and puts his coffee cup down on the dresser. He takes Hannibal's cup from him and rests it beside his own. Then he stands above Hannibal and very deliberately so Hannibal can say no if he wants to, lowers himself into Hannibal's lap. He puts his arms round Hannibal's neck and pulls his friend close.

Hannibal holds on to Will like he might vanish again. His face buried in the neck of the jumper the old man gave to Will. They sit there like that for a good long while.

Enough for Hannibal to go through a phase of quietly crying, then shuddering, then breathing roughly, then slowly, gradually returning to normal again. Will feels it all with him. He lets himself.

After what seems like hours Hannibal says 'you are surprisingly heavy'. Will leans back so they can see each other's faces. And smiles a lot. Hannibal smiles and smiles back. Will leans down and kisses him. They spend the next long period of time kissing each other, stroking each other's faces and arms and backs.

Will is trying to disperse his weight so that he doesn't entirely squash Hannibal. Hannibal, perhaps is reluctant to let Will up, perhaps not surprisingly.

'I missed you' says Will into Hannibal's mouth. 'And I, you. Is there more you feel able to say now?'

'I trust you Hannibal, I want to tell you everything. What's mine to tell anyway. Can I?'

'Yes. But please could we sit somewhere else. I can no longer feel my toes, my circulation has been compromised'

'You Horror!'

'Indeed'.

Will uses Hannibal's key to get into his own room through the adjoining doors, to find some clean clothes. He has a vague wonder about returning the clothes he was given. Maybe. He goes into the bathroom aware that Hannibal is trailing him, hovering slightly. 'I'm not going anywhere this time. I'll be ok in the bathroom' Hannibal levels a look at him 'or you could just sit on my bed and wait for me to come out. I won't even close the door'

'Thank you'

Ten minutes later, Will is drying his hair, now dressed in a long sleeved cotton tee shirt and some old sweat pants. Hannibal it seems must have left the room as he is seated on Will's bed but now wearing his pyjamas and a robe.

'Where would you like to be? You should know there is absolutely no likelihood of me letting you sleep alone tonight'

'Your room then. I like the layout better'

Hannibal says nothing. The rooms are, as far as he can tell, identical.

'Very well. Bring your pillows. You may not steal mine. I am more glad than I can say that you have returned, but not to the extent of relinquishing my pillows, probably in the armpit of the night, when you think they will go undefended. I may also tie you to my wrist so that you can't sleep walk either'

Will laughs at him. Knowing it is only half a joke. 'I told you I made you something.' He goes to the pants he was wearing and takes a wooden spoon from one of the pockets. 'Here. It's walnut. I thought you could use it for something kitcheny'

Hannibal takes the spoon enjoying its texture and tactile quality. It's a lovely thing. 'How is it that you have returned, as well as I have ever seen you, and you have brought with you a spoon that you have made?'

Will settles the pillows he's brought, on the bed and pats beside him, Hannibal sits and arranges his own as he likes and draws the covers over himself. He half turns, 'well?'

'It began with the stag....'

.....

By the time Will isn't even half way through the story they are both yawning so much that it's obvious that he can't carry on. But it's a clean kind of tired rather than a desperate one. Never the less, Hannibal takes the long tie of his robe and makes a slip knot. He loosely fits it over Will's wrist, and then ties the other end to his own. Will says nothing. But he smiles.

They both settle into the mattress, discarding pillows and arranging covers as they like. Will has a moment of thinking that Hannibal could lose his licence for sharing a bed with a patient. Hannibal has a moment of thinking that under other circumstances he might... but not now. Not now.

He turns out the light beside him and the room moves into darkness. As they breathe in the silence Will leans over and kisses Hannibal again. They kiss deeply, passionately. Will moaning his feelings of the last few days into each movement of his mouth. Hannibal conveying beyond words all his desperate love and fear.

If either of them had wondered at all if what the other felt was some kind of classical platonic regard, this alone would let them know different. There's the heat of real desire and all

encompassing need.

It's a prelude to something between them something that will carry them forward into the years that stretch out ahead, or it could be. And then, they both yawn. Enormous, oxygen depleting yawns. 'We're both too tired' they both laugh at themselves, each other. With a kind of comfort that gives the nod that this isn't a once and for all occurrence. A mistake they will regret tomorrow. This isn't the beginning, that's been going on for months, but maybe it's the end of the beginning.

'The woman in the diner said something when you were gone. She told me she tries to let three things guide her actions and words, "is it true, is it necessary, is it kind". You are these things to me.' Hannibal speaks into darkened silence, but his words light the way forwards

Written in the hearth and home.

Chapter Summary

The closing of the Lost Boys case. It has a bigger impact on them than they first realise. What is the cost of love?

Chapter Notes

TW. Description in broad strokes of a panic attack.

At the diner in the morning the air of palpable relief continues to hang around them. Jack's call, 'on speaker please' is the focus they need to get them out of the static sense of, there but for the grace of god go I, that they all feel, and from there back into the grim realities of the case. The case they're supposed to have been working. It's a rude awakening (rude!)

Jack's update sees them all trot back to the motel, pack hurriedly and then squeeze the five of them into the SUV. He's hoping the team will use the time it takes to reach the rest of the group to go over the information and evidence from the two most recent scenes which in effect they've all missed out on.

They know there are several children still bonded to an all present maternal figure. The extent to which the children do or don't do her bidding is now in question after they found the remains of one of the children at the most recent scene. To be sure his family had all been slain, but so had he.

This indicates to all of them that not everything went as planned in the encounter. Her hold may be only partial or may be stronger with those who have been with her for longer, or with those whose own family dynamics were more problematic than not.

Of the three children still assumed to be in the group only one of them has an immediate biological family left to them. So, that's where the whole team is heading, in what they hope will be a preventative intervention at the home of little Christopher.

Jimmy tries not to be excited that for the first time ever they will get to use the 'nee naw' and flashing lights on the vehicle. He and Zeller have both grumbled that if they never get to use it why do they have it. Today however is different. And the sound fuels their drive towards the anticipated confrontation.

As they get closer to their goal there is an increasing feeling of expectation in the group. They might get there in time to save the family, maybe in time to save the children too. Even if they've been involved in some of the killing there is the issue of undue influence that any good lawyer would be able to argue. They are still children to be saved.

At some level they hope they are saving these boys not just from immediate danger but from themselves and what they have wrought. After all, isn't that what we all want? To be saved from the worst of ourselves, to mostly reflect the best?

When they arrive the FBI teams manage to divide the ersatz family in two, effectively neutralising one of the groups by an overwhelming show of force. In the smaller group there is just one of the children, Christopher and the 'mother' figure. It's his family home, so in this encounter there are many kinds of things at stake.

Will is nearest to the woman and boy. Both she and Will are armed. The woman with her gun on the child, knowing that no one will risk him. Will though takes another tack. He becomes ever more dangerous when he puts down the gun and speaks directly to the child. Not simply as though Christoper is something that matters here because he is a pawn in an adult's fantasy, but because he, Christopher is the only thing that matters at all.

Somehow his words ring true, his invitation, reaches both the boy and the adult. When he lets the boy know that Will is there only for his good, she sees her mistake, takes her gun off the child and aims it at Will. It's the moment they need as Beverly takes the opening and shoots the woman.

As she lies on the ground, bleeding out. Will returns to what Hannibal said last night. He bends down to her and speaks levelly 'you have been neither true or kind to these children, and neither are you necessary to them'. It's probably the most honest and direct he's ever been with a perpetrator given that most such encounters don't go well. He thinks back to Stammetts and Hobbs, no, not well at all.

.....

Later they are back in the SUV, slightly high on success and slightly depressed by the ramifications and outcomes too. The three boys are all in a state of traumatic stress. They have been exposed to one set of values and mores for so long it is hard for them when they are confronted by some radically different ones. The norms of the society they might one day want to re-join are not part of the story they have been telling themselves for a good while.

Not all stories are benign, some of them end with blood on the snow and running in terror across frosted glass. Sometimes stories tell us and not the other way around.

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Later still, and still in the SUV;

'It was a great moment when you were all standing there doing the Charlie's Angels thing.'

'Will babe, what are you talking about?'

'When we went out the back floor of the house, I hadn't got my gun out but the three of you plus Jack all stood on the back patio doing a kind of Angels thing. It was great. I wish I'd got a picture.'

'That's who you're comparing us to, Charlie's Angels?'

'I don't even want to think about which one I am' grumbles Jimmy.

It is the one moment of humour in the day.

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The fuel of adrenaline gradually wears off, and now all they face is an extended journey home. Beverly insists they take a break and stop to go over the map to try not to cover all the eastern US en route to Quantico. It's a route that takes them virtually parallel to the middle section of the Appalachian Trail.

Somehow, perhaps the current of their previous few days pulls them back in and they talk about southern gothic stories, myths and legends. Tales from the old people's and the First Nations. It doesn't take them particular places, some of the stories just being the kind that wind round you and live in you. They speak briefly about how the boys might tell their own stories, to themselves, when they are older. How they will make sense of what happened to them over a relatively short period of their lives? Of course to a nine year old six months is a long time. But to a fifty year old? A ninety year old? What will they say when they look back. Will all of their lives be about that brief period?

Hannibal has a moment of illumination as they talk about stories that that only come to life in the telling. That the spell they hold over people is spun and cast only in that particular constellation of elements or form of words. Something piercing the void. Some stories are so powerful they can't be told, just lived.

He thinks suddenly of the ways in which he is allowing his sense of narrative causality to be a major driver in his life. As though he is governed by it rather than his conscious self doing the governing. It is something of a shock. He is used to being in control, but what if all that he has achieved is because he is being controlled.

He thinks of himself as the architect of more than just his mind palace. But maybe, like the mind palace this way of living he has carved out for himself, forged in blood and bone is an illusory, slippery thing, subject to change, rising damp and dry rot, infestation or demolition orders.

He thought he had made his life. But maybe it has made him. Nothing happened to him, to make him as he is, he happened. But thinking of it like this it's more that he happened to himself, has allowed himself to be tied to an idea of himself drawn in another time with other needs. He thinks about imperatives for change. He thinks about change and what it looks like, feels like. Tastes like.

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Back at Quantico they tiredly empty the SUV, evidence being checked in, paperwork completed, resources logged back in or re-stocked. The boring administrative work that is tempered by their work in the field, where correspondingly they yearn for paperclips and pencils. The fizz that carried them home along the Blue Ridge has dissipated like flat champagne. They want to be home. Home.

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Wolf Trap is almost half way between Quantico and Baltimore, but Will's car is at Hannibal's. No one thinks to ask why Hannibal drove Will to Quantico at the beginning of this on the road trip. Or if they notice it they are too polite to ask. Given this is Team Sassy Science we're talking about, they are probably just too tired to notice.

There are hugs and promises of texts and worrying and more promises and Will and Hannibal extract themselves. The Bentley is at Quantico, where it's sat for almost a week. It's a smooth easy drive, just a little over sixty miles to Baltimore, across the state lines.

Along the way Will and Hannibal don't say much. They agree Will will go to Baltimore and pick up his car and return home. On the radio is a programme of music by Grieg. Peer Gynt. It's music that has a lot of meaning to Will so he lets himself inhabit it.

Despite the promise of the previous night they are both somehow defeated and deflated by the events of the day. Perhaps they are both reminded of the doctor patient relationship they still provisionally peg themselves to.

Perhaps it is that Hannibal knows he was horrified that Will gave up his firearm, was without a bullet proof vest and put himself directly and deliberately in the line of fire. He has managed not to say anything. Knowing that he is still too caught up in the emotion of both today and the previous days' traumatic separation, it is better that Will goes home.

Will is horrified too, at himself for having so thoughtlessly, not even a day after being missing, put himself into immediate danger, without really thinking of how this might impact the others in the team. How Hannibal might feel.

No one has said anything, they may not have consciously put it together, and though it worked, the tactic of giving up your gun will not be a popular one. There may be some kind of internal review. If Jack can sit on it he will. But Will knows there is some kind of reckoning coming with Jack.

He's also beginning to pick up that Hannibal has withdrawn. He suspects it's to do with the way in which Will would have given everything to save that little boy and nothing to save himself. Hadn't he just demonstrated that he would? Hadn't everything Will told Hannibal about the stag napping indicated that he had no sense any more of how to save himself? Or even if he would.

Will knows that one of his problems once he gets so distressed in the field is that he can't get the objectivity to then get out of whatever place he's ended up in. The worse he gets, the

worse he gets. It can all spiral down rather fast. If he's in the mind of a victim he can end up utterly liable to victimisation, if he's in the mind of a killer it can be all kinds of other trouble. He wants to tell Hannibal this. But he's already too far gone.

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Once in Baltimore, at Hannibal's home, Will briefly hugs Hannibal before getting in his own car and starting the engine. He doesn't look at the house again until he's heard the front door closing. Then he lays his head down briefly on the steering wheel. He feels like he's fucked it up. His chest feels tight and he thinks he might cry. He wants to go and knock on the door. But he's too scared and overwhelmed to.

He looks back again at the house and up in the windows of the third floor he thinks he can see two faces looking down at him. He shifts in his seat to get a better view, but they're gone. So it must have been just a trick of the light. Or he's seeing things. God he's probably not safe to drive. Now he is very very close to crying.

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Indoors, Hannibal feels a great shaft of pain. If he was braver he'd open the door again and pull Will inside and never let him go. Only the day before yesterday he was saying he would let go of fear. How easy it is to do in the abstract. But love is a complex landscape. And he doesn't have a map, only one that he is drawing untidily on the back of a napkin, making it up as he goes along. And he has other matters that require attention.

He goes up the stairs to the third floor and opens a door,

'Hannibal! You're home. Did your friend not wish to come in? He looks unhappy. He is just sitting in his car. He is the one of whom you have spoken. Will?' She turns from the window then 'But are you well my dear?'

'Yes my love, I am fine. If a little tired and preoccupied. It has been an eventful week. Shall I tell you of it?' He turns to the other woman in the room 'shall we have some tea?'

.....

Eventually Will gets it together to drive away. Half way to Wolf Trap he has to stop as he can feel the edges of panic moving towards him, rolling forwards like a storm across the sky. He waits for it, lets it rush and break over him. He's caught in the turmoil for an endless time. So long, the sky changes colour and the air loses what little warmth it had. He can't move. He sits and he sits and lets it flush his system out until he is left shaking and exhausted in his seat. Oh god. Hannibal.

Eventually he turns the engine on again. Conscious perhaps that if he doesn't move soon he might die from exposure for all that he is in his car. Night is falling fast and the temperature drops quickly this side of the October moon.

At home, the dogs are as ever delighted to see him. There's is a conditional love that is entirely explicable - food, water, warmth, play. There's a note from his walker/sitter just

alerting him that Buster continues to have trouble with digestion. The little dog has been looking peaky for a while. Will pulls him onto his lap and strokes him, each giving and receiving comfort.

Will manages to pull himself around the house, eats something, puts clothes into the washing machine and later into the dryer, feeds the dogs, plays with them, all the while maintaining a level of white noise in his head that has, in the past, been a precursor to something bad happening. He made promises this time. He must call Beverly or Hannibal. He must. Or Jack. Or someone.

'Brian? It's Will. I know you've only just got home. I'm sorry, so sorry. I need you to come and get me and take me to hospital or something. I'm sorry, I can't ....' he stops. Simply unable to say anything more

'Will? Will? Are you still there? Will? Fuck it. Hold on. Hold on. I'm coming now. I'm coming now. Don't do anything. Wait for me.'

Zeller has never responded to an emergency call from a friend. He has no experience to draw on whatsoever. But he'll bloody well try. In the car he heads in the direction of Wolf Trap, he lives the right side of Quantico so it's only 15 miles. Bev is closer still, he rings her cell

'what is it Z. I was nearly asleep? It better be good and involve chocolate'

'no chocolate, Will. Meltdown. His house. Go now! You're closest, I'm on my way. Don't talk. Go'

She too doesn't double guess herself but runs for the car. In the car she calls Hannibal 'can't talk, in the car. Will. Something, bad. Don't know what. He called Brian. Help. Please.'

'Beverly put the phone down and use both hands on the steering wheel. I'm coming now. I will see you there. I'll bring some torches, just in case'

Beverly drops her phone and concentrates on driving. Fuck. She knew it, no she won't do it to herself again. Her friend has a disorder. It impacts him. It doesn't make him a stupid person. And he reached out. She doesn't ask why Brian? She'll think about that later. What happened on the drive home? Did something happen with Hannibal? Pointless to speculate.

When she arrives Will's car is there. The hood is warm but hasn't been running recently. She parks behind it, she'd rather he couldn't drive in what ever state he is in. And its nose is close enough to the barn to make turning difficult.

The front door stands open, the lights are all on, and when she goes in the dogs are still there curled up in their beds. Winston looks up to watch her and wags his tail slowly. Will's not anywhere downstairs. She climbs the stairs and looks in all the rooms. Nothing. Fuck. She looks out of the windows, he ended up on his roof sleepwalking one day. They'd all giggled. You can laugh about it when nothing bad came of it.

Now she wants to cry. It's too much on top of the disappearing act of the last week. Not Will's fault. She tells herself again. It's so easy to blame people for being ill or adversely affected by

their biology or neurology. But scolding them when they in the throes of the impact of the most challenging part of themselves not surprisingly is of no assistance whatsoever.

She can see Zeller's headlights coming towards her along the road that leads to Will's house and no where else. She goes downstairs to join him. Jimmy is in the car too. Bev reckons Hannibal will be here in maybe another twenty minutes if he breaks the speed limit most of the way. He's there in eighteen.

He has torches and his medical bag. In case. In case what no one asks. They turn to Brian 'what did he say'

'ok, it was pretty much I know you've only just got home, I need you to come and get me and take me to hospital or something. He kept saying he was sorry. And that he couldn't, but he didn't say what, he just stopped talking.'

'Did he leave the phone line open?' Brian has to think 'I don't know. He might have closed the phone or ended the call, I don't know. Sorry' 'lets try ringing it.' They can hear it ringing somewhere close by, and are momentarily pleased when they think he must have taken it with him. But they find it in the grass a little beyond the barn. Still, maybe this means he went in this direction.

'We will go in twos and we will each take a phone and two torches and several blankets. Where does he fish? Can you get to the lake and the boathouse from here or must you go round?'

'There's a path'

'Good. We will go that way and then split up to go round both sides of the lake'

'What if he's not..'

'One thing at a time. If we don't find him in the next hour we will call the police. Is that acceptable? Good, onwards then'

Thirty minutes later they have skirted both sides of the lake and are at the small boathouse. It's unlocked and the boat that is usually there is gone. 'Maybe he's got it out of the water already? It could be in the barn?' They turn and look across the lake. It's not big. But it's big enough that with the mist rising from it they can't see to the centre, let alone all the way across. The water is also frigid. None of them could stand it for long. If Will is out in the middle, they might simply not be able to get to him.

Zeller has been looking at the lengths of ropes hung up in the eaves of the boathouse, they look like climbing rope, long thin nylon rope in different colours. 'Tell me if this crazy, but if there is enough rope couldn't we make a long enough length and then walk up the lake on both sides dragging the rope across the surface so that if the boat is there we'll kind of drag it along?' 'Could we get the tension right?' 'Would we have the strength to keep it taut?'

Jimmy says 'ok, ten minutes to try this crazy idea and then we're calling the police and getting them to bring a boat. Ok?' Everyone nods. There are six lengths of rope and it looks

like they actually have more than they need, Beverly and Hannibal take one end and Jimmy and Zeller the other.

They all wrap the rope around their hands a few times. And split into two pairs, walking away from each other keeping the rope taut gradually releasing more as they need to go further apart. Then they have a few minutes to adjust and get the rope tight as they start to walk forward down the long sides of the lake. After five minutes the rope feels impossibly heavy and it's not clear they will get all the way to the end.

Just as both pairs are thinking it can't possibly work and they have used all this time the rope snags and then moves again, with a different feel to it as though it is sliding on something. A few minutes later the boat glides into the reeds at the end of the lake. Will is curled up in the bottom. Dressed in his shirt and pants. He clearly didn't make it to bed.

His feet are bare and he's cold to the touch. They get him out of the boat and roll him in blankets. He's not asleep, but he's not awake either. And he's unresponsive. Of the three men Hannibal is the largest, so he's the one who carries Will back to the house. He's not especially light, but no one says anything they just trudge along with Hannibal, carrying the things he'd been holding.

At the house Hannibal dispatches Beverly to make drinks for them all and Zeller to find warmer and softer clothing. He and Jimmy take Will's cold clothes off and wrap him back up until Brian returns with something more comfortable. They dress him in these, and lay him down on the bed in the living room.

He's still mostly unresponsive but he has tears rolling down his face. Hannibal sits on the edge of the bed and strokes the side of his face and his hair, wiping his tears away with a handkerchief. A little like the way you'd comfort a dog or a child. Beverly comes back with warm drinks and Hannibal makes one of them more tepid by adding cold water 'you can't shock the system too much, just a little warmth to begin with'.

Jimmy holds Will up whilst Hannibal uses a tube from his bag to help Will drink. He does. The simple action of sipping and swallowing happening almost automatically but not quite. So that he has to return a little to consciousness. Will coughs. And then coughs again. He holds his hand up to the cup and shakily tries to take it. Hannibal holds on but lets Will direct it now.

When he's had most of the cup full, he slumps back against Jimmy who lets him lie down again, carefully propped on a couple of pillows. The others drink their warming teas as Will slowly comes back, a little at a time, to be present in the room.

'Sorry' he whispers, 'sorry'. They look at him. Pale and drawn and desperate.

'We have chosen to be with you Will. Leave sorry for those who'd come against their will'

'was that a bad pun?'

'Ah. No. You are not entirely without humour then?'

'Didn't say it was a good one'

'Wretched man'

'Yeah. S'true'

Hannibal looks at the others. 'If Will allows it I'm going to give him a sedative and then tomorrow he will see his own regular physician and we will get him signed off for recovery. I'd suggest that each of you asks too for some recovery time. This has been a strain on everyone. And I don't just mean tonight, the case as a whole was distressing and disabling, not only for Will. We have all been affected.'

Zeller nods slowly 'yes. You're right. I feel, maybe something like pulverised. I could do with a day or two just to get straight with myself' Hannibal nods at him. 'In that case you must ask for time, it is essential to your mental wellbeing.'

'Brian' Will whispers so quietly you can barely hear so he bends down and Will says something into his ear. Brian looks quite affected by it and he shuffles a good bye and goes out the door Jimmy going with him after a lift of his hand in farewell. Beverly hugs Hannibal and then kneels down beside the bed so her face is near Will's 'I love you'. She pushes his nose lightly so he wrinkles it and then she's gone too.

Hannibal finds some long lengths of cord and ties them once again into a leash for Will attached to an ankle and tied to the corner of the bed frame.

'Sedative?'
'Yes. Please. Hannibal.'
'Yes?' '
'Please will you stay, please will you take me to the doctor's tomorrow'
'yes. Of course'

'It was a good pun'
'Sleep now Will'

Hannibal removes his shoes and then goes to the bathroom to change into some night clothes he brought with him. Back in the living room he looks down at his friend/patient. The line blurs between Wills two roles in Hannibal's life. Yesterday more as a friend, a lover even. And tonight more as a patient. It's becoming ever more difficult to navigate between the two. And he's worried about irreparably damaging one at the expense of the other. He lies down on the farther side of the bed and Will turns and tucks himself into the curve of Hannibal's body. He pulls his arm round Will to hold him still and safe.

They both sleep.

Hidden in the hearth and home

Chapter Summary

> The aftermath of the lost boys case and the incident at the lake, Dr Sutcliffe not being a jerk, and An extraordinary surprise.

It is a long and difficult night, albeit fitted into only five hours. Will wakes several times and tries to sleepwalk twice. By morning he is wrung out and tearful. Part of him desperately wants Hannibal to go. He hates him seeing him like this. But, another part of him is just hugely relieved that he has stayed. He's almost willing to believe he won't be abandoned by his friend.

At the back of his mind, just lurking, like slugs in the lettuce, are two nasty thoughts. The first is that his psyche has manufactured a crisis in order to pull Hannibal back in with his ongoing compassion for Will in distress. The other is that the more he manifests these symptoms the more likely it is that Hannibal will see him once again as a patient rather than as a lover or potential partner. Will worries that me might be self-sabotaging, but can't find the words to express this. Describing it also makes it more real. He's caught between Scylla and Charybdis. Maybe seeing his own doctor will help.

'Hannibal, I've spoken to the reception staff, Dr Sutcliffe is going to fit me in at 11:00. Do you have patients this morning or can I ask you to take me and come into the appointment, maybe take notes, as I may not be up to keeping on track with what he says?'

'I have one patient today, but I've already asked a colleague to cover for him. I wasn't sure if you would want me to come, but I thought it prudent to prepare, of course I'll come'

'Thank you. I've kept a diary of symptoms and incidents to bring with me, I started one when I had the thing with the students gas lighting me, I thought it might be helpful going back into the field. So I began a new one.'

'Will that's very useful. Do you have it to hand?' Hannibal is about to stretch his hand out for it and then stops 'I was about to ask to see it. But I want to be clear about this. I'm coming with you as your friend. I'm not your doctor. If you needed to see a psychiatrist now, I would refer you. I don't think you do. I think you need support and a steer for the stress Jack puts you under and the impact it has on you. Are we both clear on that?'

'Yeah. That's a relief actually. I. Ok. Straight up?' Hannibal nods 'I was worried about this' he explains his concerns and the two nasty questions hanging over him. Hannibal pulls him into a hug and they lean into each other.

'I think we simply need to try to keep communicating with each other. As clearly as we can. I'm sometimes a little abstruse, perhaps over fond of complex metaphor (Will snorts, possibly involuntarily, possibly not. Hannibal side eyes him) so I shall make an effort. But you are not my patient. If I am honest with you (he looks a bit embarrassed) I haven't thought of you like that for a while. I know Jack still hopes I will act as your paddle to keep you straight. What ever he thinks, my motivation is that I care about you. I'm reasonably sure that's reciprocated (Will nods), that possibly we're also more than simply friends. But probably this is not the moment to consider this development. I hadn't meant to raise it at all yet.'

'Because?'

'Because I was concerned it might stress you further'

'Good news doesn't usually stress me so much'

'And you consider this good news?'

'And I worry about my self-esteem issues!'

'Will, I am under no illusions, I am not an easy person. There are many reasons I have not been involved in an intimate relationship for a very long time.'

'Great! We can be two difficult people together then, but you're right. Lets not do this right now. Though I'm glad we will. Thank you Hannibal' he kisses him lightly 'thank you Will'.

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'Hannibal hello' Dr Donald Sutcliffe holds out a hand to Hannibal, they sit on a board together 'I didn't know you knew Will. How nice to see you. It's been months. Since that last board meeting. So, Will, what seems to be the problem, I like that you've brought your own doctor with you!' He smiles genially

'I'm here as Will's friend not as his doctor. He's not my patient.'

'Oh. Alright then. Oh. So. Will?'

'I've got a diary of incidents and symptoms here. I think I've missed one or two at the beginning. It started before I went back into the field I realise, well about the time I knew I would be. Or could be. It's a mix of nightmares, sleepwalking, hallucinations, usually visual, a bit of lost time, panic attacks, hyper sensitivity, insomnia, very bad migraine with vertigo, flashing lights and nausea, anxiety, constant normal headache, and perhaps not surprisingly given all the other symptoms maybe some depression too?'

He hands the folder over to Dr Sutcliffe, its chronological most recent at the front. The doctor takes it, smiles vaguely at Will and settles in to read.

'I've taken to carrying it around. I try and keep it up to date, put things in as they happen. Some of it's like last time with the students (Dr Sutcliffe makes an acknowledging face) and some of it a bit like with the PTSD, or when I had the breakdown.'

Hannibal looks at the folder and then at Will. Whilst Dr Sutcliffe is reading he says

'I had no idea that there were so many events. I feel thoroughly ashamed not to have understood the degree of difficulty you've been facing. I had thought these events were spread out, much less common.' Hannibal is rather distressed that Will has been comprehensively ill for almost the entire time they've known each other. He feels a great wash of regret and guilt. Something he's not felt for a long while.

'Hey. Not to worry. You're not my doctor. I should probably have come sooner. It's just. There's always something. When Jack asked me to go back in the field I should probably have come to see Donald then. He got me help over the student business.'

Hannibal looks only partly mollified by this . He feels increasingly shocked. Along with the guilt and regret. Dr Sutcliffe finishes reading the file.

'Ok Will. I think you're right, some of it is like after those naughty students, but there's more besides. I don't like some of the symptoms in combination. Tell me about the headaches'

Will spends a few minutes describing how they usually present. Hannibal is about to make a suggestion when Dr Sutcliffe says 'alright. I'm going to suggest an MRI. I don't like some of this. Hannibal have you got any insights to offer? You look like you're itching to, I'm not precious.'

'Just very occasionally I've noticed that Will has a sort of heated sweet smell. I don't know if it's related to some underlying problem or if it's a stress response'

'Oh my god! I smell! Why didn't you say? Now I'm embarrassed. That why I've been using that awful aftershave the science bros bought me. I thought I'd eaten something or was reacting to something which was making me sweat weirdly. Or the aspirin or pain killers. Now I'm just mortified.' He laughs. The other two doctors smile.

'So. The aftershave isn't either your choice or by choice?'

'Oh my god! I'm outraged! Jimmy said it was all they had in the drugstore. I was just grateful they had anything. I've smelled so weird. I didn't know anyone else could really tell.' He groans and puts his hand over his face

'Will it's not offensive or..'

'no. Don't say any more. Donald. I'm mortified. I've said that already. Never mind. Apparently I have a weird smell sometimes too. Lets put that in. Hannibal, how often?'

Rather meekly Hannibal says 'maybe every few days or so?'

'You actually mean most of the time don't you?'

'Possibly.'

'Ok, another symptom then' Will laughs and throws up his hands. 'Wow this is just a smorgasbord of horrible symptoms. Did I mention depression? Definitely now! Sorry.

Shouldn't be flippant.'

Donald smiles 'he used to be able to tell the nurses what their perfume or soap was. It's a handy skill, except perhaps in the morgue. Some of the scenes you're at must be rather trying?'

'I've learnt to live with it, and as you say it can be useful'

There's some back and forwards as they fix a date for the MRI scan. Dr Sutcliffe pulling a string in return for some favour he's previously given, getting an appointment within a week.

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Back in the car Hannibal asks 'will you come back with me? I'd prefer not to think of you on your own in a Wolf Trap for the next few days.'

Will is quiet. Now he's taken some action he feels somewhat better. But maybe one or two days might be sensible.

'Thank you. That's kind. Maybe for a day or two. Until I'm over this bump. It would be nice to be a bit less of a drama princess.'

Hannibal smiles 'have you demoted yourself, I thought the phrase was 'drama queen'?'

'Yeah. Well I'm saving that for if I'm worse. The boat night, wait, that was last night wasn't it? Sheesh. Oh dear. Ok that was full on drama empress! I've only ever been that bad once before. Just before I completely lost it in New Orleans. At least this time I managed to call someone.'

'Will. I am so sorry. What might we have done differently, that could have averted the episode? Do you Know?

'The difficulty is, that once I hit a certain point it becomes almost impossible to explain. I sort of lose the words. It can look like I'm sulking. I'm sorry. I knew I'd screwed up the thing with the kids, that little lad Christopher? And on the journey home I didn't know how to explain what I'd done or why. And then I got all worked up about not explaining. And I just let you go without telling you or really speaking at all' he takes a deep breath

'I had a bad panic attack on the way home. I stopped the car in time, so that was ok. But I probably sat in the car for a couple of hours. I did get home after that. It was a bit stupid really. I just don't spot it early enough to know when to say something. And I can be so caught up in someone else, I don't always know that I've effectively lost myself. Hannibal I'm sorry, for all the things I didn't say'

'Oh Will. It's me who should be sorry. I'm not your doctor, but I should still be able to recognise when something is outside your controllable actions. Will you let me try again, try to do better? I let myself get frustrated. Unfairly. I should have remembered'

'But you were upset too weren't you?'

'I was, but..'

'No Hannibal, that's not how it works. Honestly. You can feel how you feel without always being concerned that it impacts me. Maybe we both need to try harder, or differently, or earlier maybe. I've got a bit better at knowing in advance if I'll be really bad, and better at saying so too I think.'

'Will, I'm just going to pull the car over for a moment'

He does as he says and then undoes his seatbelt, he beckons Will and they sit awkwardly across the central console just holding one another.

'I never can predict you, you know. It's mostly quite exhilarating and charming'

'Not so much the lady in the lake business though?'

'Perhaps not.'

'Alright then King Arthur, back to Camelot then.'

'I always preferred Tristan myself'

'Really? I'm a Galahad kind of guy I think'

'Somehow that doesn't surprise me'

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Bev, hey girl. Thank you for looking after me. We should eat pizza? I'm going to stay with Hannibal for the next two nights and then home again. Pizza? I'm doing much better, and I've been to the docs. Did I mention the pizza? Xx Will

'Hey guys, Will is ok. He's been to the docs. Are we up for pizza? Not tomorrow night, the one after?'

Both Jimmy and Brian are about to say something when they each get a text. They smile at whatever is written there and then the three of them look at each other. 'Pizza.'

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Will spends the latter part of the afternoon reading in the slightly intimidating living room, really he prefers the library but there's a fire in here which is very nice. Hannibal is doing something ornate in the kitchen. Will can hear some classical music in the distance. He thinks it's Part but isn't sure. He feels a lot calmer now. Maybe three on a scale of nought Garrett Jacob Hobbs to ten. It's still his go to barometer. He closes his eyes.

When he opens them a few minutes later there's a woman sitting opposite him in the other armchair. Ok. So the visual hallucinations haven't gone then.

'Hello. You're Hannibal's friend aren't you?'

Ok, so maybe not a hallucination, as they can't usually walk and talk at the same time.

'Yes. That's right. I'm Will. I'm sorry. I don't know who you are.'

'Oh that's alright. I think he's deciding when it is the best time to tell you about me, or rather us.'

'Ok. So you've had a conversation about it, me?'

'Oh yes. He talks about you a lot. He hasn't done that before so I've paid a lot of attention. And well, I'm afraid I did something rather bad a while ago'

'Right. Do you want to tell me?'

'Yes please. That's why I came down. I usually live on the third floor. With my friend. She looks after me. She's lovely. But she's currently having a little nap. So. Do you remember when you stayed here after you had a funny turn in a bar?'

'I do. I thought I'd suddenly become intolerant to alcohol! I fell on my face. Hannibal and Alana, do you know Alana?'

'I know who she is. We haven't met properly. She seems nice. Teeny bit hysterical sometimes. But well meaning.'

'Yes. Ok. She does care about her friends'

'Hannibal was her mentor. Do you know that?'

'I do. They're still friends, which is a good sign for both of them. Anyway they sort of carried me here. I'd be more embarrassed if I could remember it. What about it?'

'I'm very sorry. That was me. I borrowed, no that's not right. I stole something from Hannibal's medical bag. He's normally very careful. I sneaked out. Chiyoh, she's my friend, didn't know. She was so cross. So was Hannibal.'

'Is it ok to ask why?'

'I wanted you to come and stay. I though if you did I might be allowed to meet you. Or that you and Hannibal, well. You know?'

'Oh. Ok. I see. Ok. That was probably very well intentioned. The good news is that if Hannibal and I are going to work out I think it will happen without you needing to drug either of us. I have kissed him.'

'Have you? Oh good. He didn't mention that. I was worried he might not.'

'Do you live here too all the time?'

'Most of the time. Sometimes I go to Chiyoh's cabin. You've been there haven't you? Sometimes we all go somewhere. For a holiday. But I like it here, or at the cabin best. I hope

Hannibal takes you in the spring. The blossom is lovely.'

'Yes. He mentioned it. I hope so too. I'm so sorry I didn't know you were here. I think I might have seen you the other night?'

'When you were sad? In the car?'

'Yes'

'Are you alright now? Hannibal says your work makes you very unhappy. Well. He says it makes you stressed. But that's just the modern way of saying unhappy, don't you think?

'I think that might be true. Yes. I am alright today. Hannibal took me to the doctor this morning. Someone called Donald Sutcliffe, I think Hannibal knows him too.'

'From a board. Yes. I hope he's a better doctor than a chair. Hannibal is the vice-chair, I think it's rather tedious. I've seen the minutes.'

'I'm going to be here for the next two nights. Then back home. Will that be ok for you?'

'Oh yes. We mostly get on with our own lives. But if someone's staying I like to know. You've been here twice I think. Or maybe just that one time?'

'Just once, oh no, there was the other time too.'

'Oh, when you dressed up. I'm sorry. Hannibal showed me the photos. They're very funny. You looked hilarious. I've seen the film of course.'

'Oh good. I suppose I should be glad they're not on social media.'

'Hannibal wouldn't do that. Nor would I. You're quite safe. Though the science team sounds a bit naughty. In a nice way. They might. If it didn't incriminate them too.'

She smiles very happily at the thought.

'Can I ask who you are?'

'Oh. I'm so sorry, how rude of me.' She holds out her hand to shake and Will clasps it gently. They shake. She laughs. 'I'm Hannibal's sister, I'm Mischa.'

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